

SUPREME NO LONGER!

Whitney Houston's triumphant movie debut leaves ageing Diana Ross lamenting and bitter about an opportunity—and love—lost

IN her debut movie *The Bodyguard*, Whitney Houston is being called "the new Diana Ross" — much to the anger and resentment of the real Diana.

The film, co-starring Kevin Costner, is a bitter reminder to Whitney's ageing rival of losing the love of her life, Ryan O'Neal.

Fifteen years ago, Ross was offered *The Bodyguard* lead, with

O'Neal as her co-star. They became lovers, but when Ross turned down the role because of a nude scene, O'Neal dumped her.

"She's been kicking herself ever since, and seeing Houston — young and beautiful — in a major part she could have had, is driving Diana nuts with jealousy and painful memories," a source close to the fading singing star tells TV WEEK.

"It's also forcing her to face the truth that she's a has-been. She hasn't had a hit record in years, she can't get any movie roles and she's almost 50 years old."

It was 1978 when Ross and O'Neal were approached to co-star in *The Bodyguard*, a story about a black singer who falls in love with her white bodyguard.

Diana was intrigued by the movie — but more so by O'Neal, then 37 and trim and handsome.

Soon Ross was falling for the charms that had conquered Barbra Streisand, Joan Collins and Ursula Andress before her.

She tried to fight the attraction, because she was worried about his playboy image, and told him.

O'Neal countered: "What, are you kidding me! How can I be a playboy when I've got my daughter Tatum living with me? It's not true, Diana."

"Diana knew he was full of it," says a friend of the former Supremes leader. "But she decided to take a chance."

"The main thing on Ryan's mind was *The Body-*

● Diana Ross... "she couldn't understand why Ryan O'Neal would hurt her."

guard. He was determined to do this film with her because his own movie career was very inconsistent at the time. He would do anything to get her to do this movie."

After their first meeting with the film's producers, Ross and O'Neal started dating.

Several weeks into their romance, Ross finally got to read a full script of *The Bodyguard* for the first time. And to her horror, it required her to do a nude scene.

"That's out of the question," she told O'Neal.

But he wasn't about to give up on his best movie prospect in years without a fight. He urged her to reconsider, and, pals recall, spent weeks wining and dining her and showering her with lavish gifts.

"He swept her off her feet," says one friend of O'Neal. "Diana was in love with him."

Ross gushed at the time: "He's the most special man I have ever met. He's sweet, charming, handsome and rich. What else can a girl ask for?"

On her 35th birthday, O'Neal gave her an amethyst ring, which she saw as an engagement ring.

"She wanted to marry him immediately," says a former Ross employee. "She thought they would live happily ever after."

While O'Neal's attentions made Ross fall for him, they failed in their primary aim — to persuade her to make *The Bodyguard*.

She refused to budge on her stand against the nude scene and turned down the role. Without Ross, the project collapsed and the screenplay was shelved and gathered dust for 15 years — until today.





● Whitney Houston (inset, with Kevin Costner) . . . 20 years younger than Diana Ross.

O'Neal — seeing the desperately-needed boost to his flagging career disappear — was furious.

"He told her to take a hike," says a friend of Ross. "Diana had never been rejected before and reacted by pursuing him relentlessly, trying to get him back."

Ross' hairdresser, Eddie Carroll, recalls: "She would call and pester him from my shop while she was having her hair done."

"Apparently, he would instruct his secretary to tell Diana that he wasn't at home."

"One day she went to his beach house in Malibu, barged in and started screaming at Ryan, 'You son of a bitch! I'm calling you and you're ignoring me. How dare you!' But that guy had cut her loose and that was the end of it."

Her former road manager, Michael Browne, says: "Diana wore the amethyst ring for years after Ryan was out of her life."

Adds another friend of the singer: "Diana is vulnerable and she couldn't understand why Ryan O'Neal would hurt her."

Despite her efforts to win him back, O'Neal remained icy cold towards her — and very bitter.

He said later: "Diana Ross doesn't want to show her body, doesn't want to do sex scenes on the screen, doesn't want to sing and doesn't want to be black."

Now, Ross is reliving the nightmare while Whitney Houston — gorgeous, talented and 20 years younger — "steals" what could have been her biggest role.

To add insult to injury, the nude scene that caused Ross to turn down *The Bodyguard* has been cut from the movie . . . because Houston objected to it.

From Neil Blincoe in New York

